

When Disaster Strikes

Interviews about Disaster Experience: Personal Reflections and Guidelines for Interviewers

These notes are based on the personal views and suggestions of members of Disaster Action concerning their experiences of being approached and interviewed about disasters. They are relevant for journalists, academic researchers including university students, and for those from organisations reviewing services or protocols for survivors and the bereaved. We appreciate that many requests for interviews are based on a desire to understand the first-hand experience of a disaster from the perspective of survivors and the bereaved.

The reflections in Part One aim to give an insight into what it feels like to be approached and interviewed. Part Two provides practical guidelines for those undertaking research for academic, policy-based and/or media presentations that draw on the experiences of those directly affected by disasters.

Part One: Personal Reflections on Being Interviewed

On Being Interviewed: Pros

- It was nice to feel I could **make a difference** by helping to learn lessons. I tell myself this is one way to try to reduce some of my guilt at surviving.
- By listening to my story I felt that someone was at least **acknowledging** the importance of my brother's life and death.
- It's good to have the **chance to talk** about what happened. Feeling valued by people who wish to hear your story and who are willing to listen can be helpful.
- We really wanted the **system changed** so that others following in our footsteps would benefit from our experience.
- We wanted people to know the **truth** about what had happened.

On Being Interviewed: Cons

- Having **no control** over how what I say will be interpreted or used can be a big drawback. This matters because what may be just detail to a researcher is usually part of a sensitive, significant and emotionally loaded account for me.
- I have been upset on occasions when journalists **rewrite my words** for their own agenda or put words in my mouth/make up quotes. Sometimes they do this without asking me and it is no longer my experience. I feel used. I am also taken back to what it was like not to be in control in the disaster.
- Some researchers do not seem to understand the difference between **anonymity and confidentiality**. With the media I have learnt that there is almost no such thing as confidentiality – nothing is ever 'off the record'.
- Some researchers do not understand the meaning of '**representativeness**' in relation to their research. They might draw on the personal experiences of one or two interviewees and use these to make general statements about everyone affected. It is very annoying to find that my personal experiences/views have been turned into a statement relating to others' experiences, as I know that even in one disaster everyone involved will have experiences and feelings unique to them. So I am always wary about papers or articles that make generalised claims about '*the bereaved*' or '*the survivors*'.
- **Structured questionnaires** are not necessarily appropriate for finding out detailed experiences, feelings and emotions. They can feel anonymous and filling them in on your own can make you feel vulnerable. The researcher wants the ease and speed of quantifying measurable data, but for me as the one being researched, experience and emotion may not fit into these neat boxes. My experiences and feelings to this day cannot be 'tick-boxed' and controlled in this way.
- Some researchers assume that because the disaster was some time ago you must be '**over**' it. They may also assume that because you seem less raw in the way you present yourself you will not be affected by 'opening the box'.

- Some are not interested in seeing me as more than **just a ‘victim’** and don’t want to hear about positive recovery. Or sometimes it is the other way round – they only want to hear an ‘inspirational story’. The bad researcher/journalist has already written the story before they meet you. The good one wants to reflect what is really there. So how far should questions be determined in advance? An open agenda is more likely to allow a real picture to emerge.
- Researchers/journalists normally wish **to use my experience for their own ends** – whether in pursuit of a personal qualification or an article. While this is understandable, it can be annoying when they suggest that I should feel grateful for the chance to donate my time (usually considerable), emotion and experiences without any acknowledgement of the costs (emotional and financial) to me.
- There is **no guarantee** that the interview will be used - you could be the lead story at 12 noon and at 12.30 not covered due to other news.
- Don't release pictures or give comments **unless you are really sure** about them.
- Be prepared for the fact that even the best journalists may end up **misquoting** you.

Part Two: Guidelines for Interviewers

Being interviewed can be a positive or negative experience (or a mixed experience) for those being asked the questions. The following tips are for those conducting research and/or media interviews. The purpose is to better inform interviewers in the hope of minimising the risk of interviewees feeling unprepared, exploited or abused by research and interviewing processes.

Preparation

- Approach potential interviewees with **care and respect**. If contacting them by telephone ask if the timing, etc. of the call is convenient and offer to call back later if appropriate. Be clear in explaining who you are, why you are contacting them and how you got their contact details. Be sure that you have permission to proceed with the call and if the answer is negative, please respect that.
- Remember that **recounting particular experiences** of disaster is likely to be potentially painful. Do not assume that the passing of time or the fact that an individual has spoken before to an interviewer means that it is necessarily easier or that they will be prepared to discuss issues again.
- In preparing for any contact, ensure you have done **preliminary, advance research** into key facts and details about an event. Research these as fully as you can and remember that any account may not always be objective or accurate. If unsure about details, ask. Remember that it is important to **get details correct**, such as facts about numbers and the spellings of names of people who died or were injured. Check the **Internet** for what has already been written/said because interviewees will expect you to know.
- An interviewer should have **good listening skills** and be prepared to spend time listening as part of this kind of interview. Allow for this in planning the timing of meetings. Listening is a mark of respect and courtesy, even if the detail is beyond the primary remit and purpose of your interview.
- If conducting a research project, consider the **choice of your research methods** carefully. As well as considering what is easiest and most appropriate for *you* as a researcher, consider the advantages and disadvantages for your interviewees in terms of what might feel more appropriate or user-friendly for them. Be prepared to explain and justify your methods to research participants.
- If conducting an interview for a newspaper or magazine, take time to explain the **nature, readership and style** of the publication to a potential interviewee and where your article will appear. If possible, send them a copy in advance so they may be aware of the typical style and content.
- Consider with care the **number and choice of questions** to be asked. Have a reason for asking particular questions and remember that a very lengthy list of questions may have disadvantages. Be particularly mindful of **intrusive questions** and be honest with yourself and the interviewee about why such questions are important and how answers will be used.
- The **choice of location** for an interview is important. Interviewees may feel more comfortable in places that are familiar (e.g. they may prefer for an interview to be conducted at or away from home), and may prefer either a more private or public location. Noisy public places will make tape-recording (if appropriate) harder. **Telephone interviews** have advantages and disadvantages in relation to meeting face to face; you may find it helpful to discuss these with potential interviewees.

- Are you prepared to let the interviewee have sight of a **draft paper/report or transcript** of your interview? Whether or not this is so, let them know in advance of the interview.
- Be clear and transparent about any **payment available** for interviewees, including, for example, travel and accommodation costs. Be clear about any **terms or conditions** relating to the use of personal photographs or other material owned or loaned by an interviewee.
- Be prepared for **emotion** - tears, anger, frustration.

Conducting Interviews

- Expect interviews to **take time**. As stated above, people may wish to talk about their experiences and issues beyond your agenda and questions. This may be important for the interviewee, so do not miscalculate the time needed or rush the conversation.
- Never use a **tape-recorder or other recording material** without advance permission.
- Take time at the start of an interview to remind the interviewee about the **aims of the research and use of interview material**. Interviews tend to go better if both parties feel suitably prepared, comfortable and relaxed.
- State again at the start the parameters around **anonymity and confidentiality** (see Disaster Action's leaflet: 'Working with Disaster Survivors and the Bereaved: Code of Practice on Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality').
- At the end of an interview **check key points and summarise** what has been covered. Also check if the interviewee feels OK (you might ask them what it felt like to be interviewed). Do not forget to let them know **how/when they may have access** to interview transcripts or the final article/paper produced and inform them of any deadlines/key dates for this. If you make any promises in this regard, keep them.
- Some family members may be around, but will **not wish to contribute** – this should be respected.
- Explain that there are **no guarantees** that the interview will be used.
- Ensure that you **thank** the interviewees for their time.

Use of Material

'Material' here includes observational accounts, transcripts and quotes, and also images, headings and captions accompanying articles and/or the presentation of research material. Be clear about any terms or conditions relating to the use of personal material owned or loaned by an interviewee.

- The use of insensitive material such as **photos relating to and/or depicting an event** may be distressing and offensive either to interviewees and/or others affected by that event. While editors/research supervisors may have the final say over the use of content, headings and/or images used to accompany an article, journalists/researchers have a moral responsibility to liaise between interviewees and editors/supervisors about the use and appropriateness of selected material.
- Photographs and other **personal mementoes** associated with individuals involved in a disaster are likely to have a **special significance** for their owners and should always be handled with care and respect. If borrowed and taken away they should be returned quickly and with care. Under no circumstances should irreplaceable items be passed to third parties with the danger of their being lost or misplaced. Remember that in such circumstances an apology is never enough.

Disaster Action would like to thank all those who contributed to the writing of this leaflet.